

Feds crafting regional brucellosis plan

By MATTHEW BROWN - Associated Press - 09/22/08

BILLINGS — Federal officials are crafting a new approach to the livestock disease brucellosis, with a plan to carve out the greater Yellowstone region so infections there do not lead to sanctions against cattle ranchers statewide.

That could lead to increased disease testing and stricter controls on livestock movements in parts of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming near Yellowstone National Park. Current federal rules mandate an entire state suffer sanctions on its livestock industry whenever two brucellosis cases are confirmed.

Brucellosis causes pregnant animals to abort their young. Eradicated elsewhere in the nation after a decades-long effort, it persists in elk, bison and other wildlife in and around the park.

Brian McCluskey, regional director of the federal Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), said his agency is still refining how to deal with the disease around Yellowstone.

But he said a string of recent infections in cattle revealed the shortcomings of existing regulations. Most of those cases were thought to have come from wildlife, whereas the regulations were set up to deal with cattle-to-cattle transmissions.

“Right now, the only place where there is bovine brucellosis is the greater Yellowstone area,” McCluskey said. “This is essentially creating a zone that would have a different classification for brucellosis than the balance of the three greater Yellowstone area states and the balance of the country.”

The plan as now envisioned does not call for eradicating brucellosis in wildlife. McCluskey said that would have to be dealt with separately.

Veterinarians from the three affected states have pushed for such changes following at least seven confirmed cattle herd infections in the last several years.

Following a meeting with federal officials last week in Denver, state and industry representatives said they agreed with the federal concept, but needed to see further details.

“It appears we are working toward a common goal,” said Jim Logan, assistant state veterinarian for Wyoming. “A lot of it depends on what can be agreed to in each individual state, with the producers and their industry groups.”

The latest sanctions came last month in Montana. Stricter disease testing now mandated for cattle being shipped out of Montana is expected to cost ranchers statewide \$6 million to \$12 million.

Wyoming is on the verge of suffering the same consequences following an infection in Sublette County. A second infection in Sublette remains under investigation.

Jim Magagna with the Wyoming Stock Growers Association said he would like to see a change to federal rules that call for the slaughter of a ranchers’ entire herd if any animals test positive. Magagna said those rules do not make sense if the disease came from wildlife.

“Assuming (the rancher) puts out new cattle, those could well turn around the next year or five years down the road and get infected again,” Magagna said.

Federal officials cautioned that their plan would have to be reviewed by veterinarians from other states, who could be wary if they see it as weakening brucellosis prevention.

Such a review is expected to begin in October, at the annual meeting of the U.S. Animal Health Association in North Carolina.

“You have to look at the rest of the country and the possibility of brucellosis spreading,” said APHIS spokeswoman Lyndsay Griffin.

Montana state veterinarian Marty Zaluski said he believes the plan will pass muster if APHIS can provide the science to back it up.

“It’s putting in some numbers or quantifying the risk, and then communicating what that risk is to other stakeholders, other states,” he said. “The science is what will sell it.”

Zaluski said he expects it will take six months to a year for the government to complete and enact its plan.